

VZCZCXRO7288
PP RUEHBI RUEHCI
DE RUEHCI #0141/01 1281154
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 071154Z MAY 08
FM AMCONSUL KOLKATA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1985
INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 1863
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 0864
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 0859
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 0578
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 0566
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHMFIUU/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 2426

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KOLKATA 000141

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: VILLAGE ELECTIONS - THE FOUNDATION OF LEFT POWER IN WEST BENGAL

REF: A) KOLKATA 66, B) 07 KOLKATA 345

1. (U) Summary: "Panchayat" (rural local self-governance bodies) elections in West Bengal are scheduled in three phases in May. Violence between political supporters has flared in parts of the state and has reignited in Nandigram which has seen repeated clashes between local villagers and Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPM) supporters. The panchayat elections serve as the bedrock of power for the CPM in West Bengal, and allow the CPM and its Left Front partners to maintain a stranglehold over the rural electorate. May 11, 14, and 18 are the scheduled dates for the elections, and despite efforts to criticize the CPM on its governance, West Bengal's Marxists should once again win resoundingly. End Summary

2. (U) West Bengal's State Election Board announced the panchayat election dates, which are assigned by region. May 11 is the date for polling in the state's south and west districts of East Midnapore, West Midnapore, Bankura, Purulia and Burdwan. The central districts of Nadia, North 24-Parganas, South 24-Parganas, Howrah and Hooghly will vote on May 14, and the northern areas of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad and Birbhum vote on May 18. The Darjeeling district in North Bengal is excluded from the panchayat electoral process as it has a separate local administrative arrangement and because of current instability (reftel a). At the village level 41,513 Gram Panchayat seats will be contested, while 8,798 seats at the block level Panchayat Samiti and 748 seats at the district level Zilla Parishad are up for grabs.

3. (U) Already violence has flared in parts of West Bengal between political groups. On May 5, Nandigram was again the scene of clashes between the local Bhumi Ucched Pratirodh Committee (BUPC) and CPM supporters. In 2007 there were a series of violent battles between the BUPC, which was seeking to prevent the state's plans to acquire farmland for a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and the CPM, which sought to assert its power in the area. In the past week, the GOWB removed eight police camps from around Nandigram. The police camps had been in place since the last bout of violence in November 2007 to maintain law and order. The state is now being accused by opposition groups of pulling the police out to allow the CPM a free hand in Nandigram. In one reported incident on May 5, CPM supporters allegedly pulled a 35-year old woman out of her home at gun-point, stripped, beat and raped her in front of her children and husband. The CPM also forced the family and other locals believed to be BUPC supporters to take part in a CPM demonstration. In addition, on April 30, CPM supporters fought with Trinamul Congress party loyalists in Cooch Behar, leaving one Trinamul Congress worker dead and 30 people injured.

4. (U) After the last panchayat elections in 2003 the CPM and

Left Front held an absolute majority in all districts except Malda and Murshidabad. In Malda both the Congress Party, and the Trinamul Congress/Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) combine fared well, while in Murshidabad the Congress won a majority. This year, opposition party efforts to forge a "grand alliance" and prevent a division of non-Left votes generally have not materialized because of disputes over seat-sharing. The Muslim JamiatUlemaeHind (JUH) leader Siddiqullah Chowdhury was a potential Trinamul ally, for example, but the two parties could not reach an accord. The Trinamul Congress was able to garner the support of the leftist Socialist Unity Center of India (SUCI) and some smaller parties, but this will have little impact overall.

15. (U) Although at the national level the Congress Party receives Left support to maintain the UPA coalition, it opposes the Left Front in West Bengal, and has made some efforts to put a dent in the CPM's control of the state. On April 28, Congress President Sonia Gandhi addressed the rural public in Malda and Murshidabad and attacked the CPM for the Nandigram violence last year (reftel b). Seizing on current worries over food price increases, Gandhi added that the state government should ensure a properly functioning public distribution system and control black marketeering. Interestingly, the BJP --a Trinamul Congress ally at the national level -- decided to exempt West Bengal from the BJP's all-India May 2 strike against inflation. West Bengal BJP representatives said it would add to people's woes as the state already "suffered" during a Trinamul strike on April 21.

16. (U) Comment: Despite pockets of rural discontent over the state government's policy of acquiring agricultural land for industry, rising food prices, and compensation problems in handling the avian influenza epidemic, the Left is again poised

KOLKATA 00000141 002 OF 002

for success at the polls. The Left's longstanding, extensive network in West Bengal villages and heavy-handed control contrasts starkly with the opposition's limited presence and constant infighting. Although a smaller Left Front partner, the Forward Bloc, had showed signs of wanting to break from the fold in the past, it has been firmly dealt with by the dominant CPM, leaving Left Front unity intact and its "poll machinery" prepared for a resounding victory.
JARDINE